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# THE BACKGROUND OF JAPANESE EXPANSIONISM

by

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## THE BACKGROUND OF JAPANESE EXPANSIONISM

H. J. Timperley<sup>1</sup>

Japanese expansionism is customarily thought of as a comparatively modern development postdating the opening of Japan to foreign intercourse as a result of Commodore Perry's expedition in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is suggested that in imitating the industrialization of the Occidental nations who thus rudely forced their attention upon her, Japan found it necessary to imitate also the methods by which those nations had secured for themselves markets and sources of raw material abroad. The fact is, however, that for at least seven centuries Japanese expansionism has been, in one form or another, a dominant factor in the history of the Far East.

There is abundant evidence to show that Japanese pirates, known as "wok'ou," roved the China Sea from about A.D. 1260 until they began to be displaced by a more formal type of merchant adventurer in the sixteenth century. Japanese historians have compared the activities of these seafarers to the exploits of the Portuguese, Dutch, and English buccaneers who helped to enrich their respective countries towards the end of the Middle Ages. Certainly they appear to have had a similar objective — namely, treasure. The Japanese adventurers were influenced largely by the desire to obtain Chinese minted coinage, for which there was a keen demand in Japan owing to the currency shortage caused by the rapacious taxation of the feudal lords. The gold coins formerly used in Japan had become extinct and silver coins were extremely scarce, leaving only the copper currency for common use and this gave out when, in the reign of the Emperor Shomu, orders were issued that in every province of Japan a temple was to be built enshrining a great copper image of Buddha. The Japanese were then obliged to make up for the deficiency by selling to China such goods as oil, sulphur, swords, halberds, lacquer, etc., in return for coin and it was for this reason that during the Ashikaga period in Japan commerce with the Ming empire was greatly encouraged.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. H. J. Timperley is China correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* and Advisory Editor of *Asia* magazine. This address was delivered before a meeting of the Pacific Southwest Academy held in Claremont, California, December 7, 1938.

The bitter internal strife which preceded the unification of Japan under Nobunga and his successors towards the end of the sixteenth century provided ample outlet at home for adventurous spirits, and the Japanese pirates gradually disappeared from the China Sea. But the national desire for expansion abroad led to the discovery of a convenient foothold in Southern Asia and in process of time the "wok'ou" gave place to the so-called "Red Mark" ships privileged by the government to go abroad. During the second half of the sixteenth century Japanese adventurers began to push down towards the southeast, some of the boldest going so far afield as the Philippine Islands, where they soon came into conflict with the Spaniards. It is recorded that, much exercised over the discriminatory treatment applied to Japanese in the Philippines, a certain Harada Kiemon did his best to persuade Toyotomi Hideyoshi, then the real ruler of Japan, to dispatch an expedition to "take the islands at a single blow, which would increase the sale of wheat-flour and other merchandise and bring money into the country." But Hideyoshi died shortly afterwards in the midst of his invasion of Korea and with his death Japanese expansionism came temporarily to an end.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the Japanese had established settlements at widely distributed points in Southern Asia, competing for a foothold with the Chinese, Portuguese, and Spaniards, by whom, especially in the case of the last-mentioned, they were regarded with deep distrust. The Spaniards had good cause to fear the Japanese, for in 1582 the Islands had been invaded by a flotilla of 26 ships under a Japanese pirate chief named Taifusa, who landed at the mouth of the Kagayan river. Taifusa was beaten off after a fierce battle but thereafter the Spaniards lived in terror of the Japanese adventurers and devoted much time and effort to building strong fortifications against them.

In Siam the Japanese had won for themselves a much stronger position. Even before the arrival of the Dutch and Portuguese upon the scene in the early part of the sixteenth century Japanese pirates had already extended their activities to this region, where they looted vessels coming from India, China, and even from Japan itself. A hundred years later they were still levying toll along the Siamese coast and it was while on his way to the Batani Strait that Captain John Davis, the English navigator after whom the Davis Strait was named, was killed in a fight with Japanese pirates in 1604. At this time the British, through the East India Company, were trying to obtain a share of the trade with Siam which hitherto had been largely monopolized by the Dutch but they were not successful and in 1623 they withdrew from the field.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century Japanese influence had taken deep root in Siam, both politically and socially. At that time there were resident in the country some 8,000 Japanese, who, split up into a number of self-governing groups, occupied a wide area which came to be known as the Japanese Settlement. Some of the Japanese group-leaders became powerful figures in Siamese domestic politics and at least two married royal princesses. Japanese held high positions at the court and for a time the royal bodyguard was composed of Japanese soldiers of fortune.

There is evidence of Japanese settlement in Java during the sixteenth century and in 1619 when an English fleet attacked Jakatra they found that Japanese troops were assisting the Dutch to defend the port. Large numbers of Japanese emigrated also to Cambodia, where, in about 1637, there were some 70 or 80 Japanese families upon whom the court appears to have relied a good deal for support in time of domestic emergency.

It seems likely that the exploits of these intrepid adventurers may have inspired the expansionist ambitions of Hideyoshi, the so-called "Japanese Napoleon," under whom the work of unification started by Nobunaga was completed in 1589.

The story of Hideyoshi's two fruitless expeditions to Korea in 1592 and 1597, respectively, is well known. His pretext for them was the continuance of the practice of sending Korean embassies to Japan but in reality, as Dening<sup>2</sup> has made it clear in his biography, he was influenced by the love of foreign conquest, combined with the necessity of finding employment for his restive followers. That Hideyoshi's objective was the subjugation of China there can be little doubt, for so far back as 1578 he was reported to have made this boastful declaration to his master, Nobunaga: "When I have conquered the Chugoku, I will go on to Kyushu and take the whole of it. When Kyushu is ours, if you will grant me the revenue of that island for one year, I will prepare ships of war and supplies and go over and take Korea. Korea I shall ask you to bestow on me as a reward for my services, and to enable me to make still further conquests; for with Korean troops, aided by your illustrious influence, I intend to bring the whole of China under my sway. When that is effected the three countries [China, Korea, and Japan] will be one. I shall do it all as easily as a man rolls up a piece of matting and carries it under his arm."

Hideyoshi's Korean adventure was Japan's first important foreign

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<sup>2</sup> M. E. Dening, "The Life of Hideyoshi."

enterprise during the period of her authentic history and terminated in complete failure after six years of desultory warfare which exhausted the resources of both countries. At one stage of the campaign there were as many as 200,000 Japanese serving overseas. Yet in the end, as Lafcadio Hearn<sup>3</sup> has summarized the result, "Japan had little to show for her dearly bought victories abroad except the Mimidzuka or 'Ear-Monument' at Nara - marking the spot where thirty thousand pairs of foreign ears from the pickled heads of the slain were buried in the grounds of the temple of Daibutsu."

When the great Hideyoshi died in 1598 he was succeeded by an astute statesman, Tokugawa Iyeyasu, who perceived that expansionism was a double-edged weapon. He foresaw the danger of Japan's being invaded in turn and, from the standpoint of internal politics, the possibility that if foreign commerce were allowed to continue, the Southern trading clans might become powerful enough to threaten the Shogunate. He therefore decided upon a policy of rigid isolation from all foreign contacts. Japanese ships were prohibited from going abroad and Japanese residing overseas were forbidden to return to Japan. Thus a halt was called to the expansionist activities which had been carried on for more than a century and the widely scattered settlements disappeared.

But the expansionist spirit did not die out in Japan. It remained dormant and was fanned with fresh activity by the revival of Shintoism which took place toward the end of the seventeenth century. From this revival there sprang an imperialist movement which sought to remind the Shogunate of the aims of greater Japan. Amongst the most remarkable products of the movement was a young teacher named Yoshida Shoin, vividly described by Robert Louis Stevenson<sup>4</sup> as "Yoshida-Torajiro." Yoshida and his group, who were already active, be it noted, by the time of Perry's arrival in 1853, advocated a program of foreign conquest including the seizure of Formosa, Korea, Manchuria, Saghalien, Kamchatka, and Eastern Siberia. Although fanatically anti-foreign, they recognized the impossibility of ignoring Western culture and sought instead to master Western science and apply it in Japan so as to meet foreign intruders with their own weapons. In pursuit of Western knowledge, Yoshida Shoin actually tried to stow away aboard one of Perry's ships but, as Stevenson dramatically records, he was discovered and handed over to the Japanese authorities, by whom he was executed a few years later.

<sup>3</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, "Japan, An Interpretation."

<sup>4</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, "Familiar Studies of Men and Books."

Thus Yoshida Shoin did not live to see the successful launching of the movement he had done so much to inspire. But he became a martyr in the minds of his followers and his ideas influenced many of the statesmen, including Count Ito, framer of the Japanese constitution, who guided Japan to unity and greatness later on.

Yoshida Shoin preached Japanese dominance in Asia to the exclusion of Westerners—a doctrine which has come to form one of the basic principles of modern Japanese diplomacy. The Japanese still believe that if they can keep the foreign powers out of Asia they can build themselves up into a position so impregnable that they will be able to snap their fingers at the Occident forever.

This naive conceit leaves out of account, however, several important facts. First of all, Japan's highly developed industry is dependent not only upon foreign markets but also, to a large extent, upon foreign sources of raw material. To some degree, it is true, these deficiencies might be made good if Japan succeeded in bringing China proper under her sway in addition to Manchuria, but there would still remain such vital problems as, for example, oil, without adequate supplies of which her naval and military services could not function efficiently.

In practice, the further Japan has sought to extend her control in the direction of the Asiatic mainland, the more vulnerable she has tended to become and the greater has been the strain thrown onto her internal economy, so that today Japan is regarded both by Wall Street and the City of London as a poor financial risk. Only in recent years has it come to be realized to what a degree this rapid expansion has weakened her domestic structure. Japanese territorial and trade conquest abroad have been at the expense of sound domestic development, as again and again the social and economic fabric has been strained close to the breaking point in the effort to build up the wealth and power of the nation to such a degree that attention could be safely concentrated upon internal reform.

Today, as Japan continues to extend on the Chinese mainland a front which already stretches over a distance of 3,000 miles, there are increasing indications of economic strain at home. Are the Japanese destined to over-reach themselves and collapse into a state of economic and political confusion or will some modern Iyeyasu arise to point the way back to stability? Time holds the answer to a question fraught with grave import for the world at large.

The outlook is vastly complicated by the fundamental clash between the maritime aims of the Japanese navy, who may be considered the logical heirs of the sea-going tradition established by the "wok'ou" many

centuries earlier, and the continental policy of the Japanese army, strongly influenced by the spirit of Hideyoshi. For some years past the naval party, which, being able to wield a powerful influence in domestic politics, has been insisting that the national effort should be diverted to the re-establishment of Japan's lost position in the South Seas and the Pacific.

In this connection it is interesting to note that some Far Eastern observers foresee as a likely development in the present Sino-Japanese hostilities the establishment of a Japanese naval base in South China, most likely on the island of Hainan, which commands the approaches to the Gulf of Tonking. They point out that this would enable Japan to set up a strategic position against Indo-China, the Malay States, the Dutch East Indies, British North Borneo, and the Philippine Islands. Such a move might well prove the prelude to a southward expansion which would carry with it grave implications regarding the interests of the other Pacific powers.





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